Utilizing Verbally Told Stories for Informal Knowledge Management

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Abstract In knowledge management, the act of telling stories is utilized to capture and convey knowledge. Spoken language is the basis for telling stories. Collaborative audio-based storytelling uses the act of verbally telling stories in groups. In this paper, we explore how to utilize verbally told stories for informal knowledge management. To identify the requirements for an information system that supports collaborative audio-based storytelling, we review the body of knowledge in relation to storytelling and knowledge management. After reviewing the state of the art, we present the CASTing information system. CASTing (Collaborative Audio-based StoryTelling) addresses the identified requirements and supports a process for collaborative audio-based storytelling. CASTing consists of a client application which supports nomadic work as well as a web portal which aims at building a storytelling community. We present CASTing along our process for collecting, structuring, linking and using verbally told stories. We conclude with a report on first experiences as well as an outlook on future directions.

Keywords Storytelling · Collaboration · Knowledge management · Verbally told stories

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1 Introduction

Telling stories is not only a given phenomenon of human practice; it is purposefully used as a method or a procedure in different areas of application under the designation storytelling. Collaborative storytelling aims at the development of a common understanding within a group by coordinated narrating activities (when each person contributes his or her own knowledge and his or her own interpretation of a common experience) in order to elicit and disseminate tacit knowledge.

Spoken language is a fundamental and quite natural part of human communication, whereas written communication always requires technical effort. Spoken language is the basis for telling stories, even if in the western industrial societies literary, i.e. written, forms of stories are widely common. However, when considering the increased demand for audio books and the rise of podcasting, a comeback of listening can be determined. By using verbally told stories only, collaborative storytelling can be rooted in everyday’s life communication, take advantage of the renaissance of listening and allow stakeholders to capture experiences in-situ.

Consider for example, a company which has the goal to elicit implicit knowledge on project management. Expert project managers like to share their knowledge about best practices for project management as well as lessons learned while dealing with problems in a project. However, often this informal knowledge is not captured and made accessible to novice project managers. The everyday practice in informal knowledge management further shows that this kind of knowledge is usually communicated in form of stories (Brown and Duguid 2000; Stewart 1998). However, these stories are not preserved, accessible and reusable. Furthermore, the stories are not abstracted and the best practices in the stories are not revealed. As a result, the ageing population of expert project managers knowing these stories and capable of telling these stories leads to a gradual loss of implicit knowledge and best practices.

In our opinion, such implicit knowledge can be captured, be preserved and made explicit by means of collaborative audio-based storytelling. In this paper, we investigate how collaborative audio-based storytelling can be supported by an information system and which requirements such an information system has to fulfill.

Following a design science approach (Hevner et al. 2004), we first review the body of knowledge in relation to collaborative storytelling and knowledge management. Based on this body of knowledge, we discuss our research motivation and define our research question. Based on an application scenario, we identify the requirements for an information system that enables audio-based collaborative storytelling. Subsequently, we present a process and the CASTing (Collaborative Audio-based StoryTelling) information system, which are our solution to address the identified requirements. We report on first experiences and discuss how these first experiences will influence future iterations in the development of CASTing. We finally conclude with a view on future developments.

2 Background

In this section we will first briefly review the body of knowledge in relation to storytelling in knowledge management and education as well as applications of collaborative